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# Hawaii hotel wants to fix its beach frontage

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By [Mary Vorsino](#)  
Advertiser Urban Honolulu Writer

A Waikiki hotel is seeking to restore a sandy stretch of beach fronting its property and inhibit erosion with three T-shaped, 160-foot-long groins in the water.

Combined with pumping in sand, the project would add about 38,000 square feet — or enough space for 500 people — to Gray's Beach, which fronts the Sheraton Waikiki. Currently, there is no sandy beach at the Sheraton except during very low tide.

Onlookers say if the proposal succeeds, it could spur other hotels to take a more active role in one of the biggest problems facing the No. 1 tourist destination in the Islands — the gradual disappearance of Waikiki Beach to erosion.

The preliminary proposal for the shoreline in front of the Sheraton Waikiki is being closely watched by other beachfront hotels — and tourism experts, who say the restoration of Waikiki Beach could



The Sheraton Waikiki hotel wants to put up three T-shaped groins so that it will have a beach that can accommodate up to 500 people. The proposal is being well-received by Waikiki executives but is also drawing criticism from the surfing community.

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Rex Johnson, president and chief executive officer of the Hawai'i Tourism Authority, said many tourists have expressed concern in state surveys about crowding in Waikiki, which could be tied to the small size of the beach.

"Waikiki Beach is the asset that's known globally," he said. "From a state perspective, it's real high on the priority list."

But the Sheraton plan, which still must undergo a year or more of permit approvals and public meetings, already faces opposition from surfers and others who worry the rock groins will be bad for the environment and a popular surf break.

"It's very foolish what these people are trying to do," said George Downing, a founding member of the group Save Our Surf, who is against adding any more permanent structures to Waikiki Beach.

Seven years ago, similar opposition quashed a state project to install three T-shaped groins at Kuhio Beach. The groins would have replaced crumbling breakwaters, but lawmakers tabled the \$2 million plan because groups such as Save Our Surf were against it.

The proposal for Gray's Beach has not yet been taken public, but Sheraton Waikiki owner Kyo-ya Hotels and Resorts has been talking to small groups of water users and community leaders in recent months in hopes of soliciting comments — and support.

Ernest Nishizaki, executive vice president and chief operating officer for Kyo-ya, declined to discuss the reaction of those the company has talked to so far. "We share the community's belief that the preservation of our precious natural environment is a vital concern. Sadly, many of our beaches have disappeared over the years due to erosion," he said in a statement.

"We recognize the input of all stakeholders is essential. We will continue to explore with them the possibility of restoring Gray's Beach and ensure all of the proper studies and assessments are undertaken to further enhance one of our well-known natural treasures. Should the restoration plans come to fruition ... this new beach would be open to the public."

## NO MASTER PLAN

Over the past half-century, major sections of the Waikiki shoreline have been lost to erosion. Kuhio Beach alone has lost an average 3,200 cubic yards of sand per year for the past 50 years, according to state figures. And with no master plan to tackle the problem, the state appears unlikely to present a wholesale fix for the shoreline anytime soon.

A feasibility study on the Kyo-ya proposal, paid for by the company, says the proposed T-shaped groins would fit in well with other possible erosion-

abatement additions along the shoreline. The groins would likely not affect the Populars surf break and would have little environmental impact beyond covering a small portion of the reef that has algae fed on by sea turtles, according to a the report, which has been distributed to surfers and other members of the community.

The report, by Sea Engineering Inc., a coastal engineering and research company with an office in Waimanalo, points out that the groins — made out of 2,800- to 4,800-pound rocks — would quickly blend into the environment, providing a place for coral to colonize and a refuge for small fish and other animals. Sea Engineering officials referred questions to Kyo-ya.

The T-groins would be the first permanent structures aimed at stopping erosion to be built off Waikiki in 30 years. The previous structures were built at Kuhio Beach.

The latest erosion abatement project is part of massive planned renovations — totaling \$750 million — at four Waikiki properties owned by Kyo-ya, including the 1,700-room Sheraton Waikiki. In its report, Sea Engineering said the beach restoration project would cost between \$3 million and \$4 million.

It is unclear how long Gray's Beach has been without a sandy stretch, but many say it has been at least two decades. Downing, of Save Our Surf, and others also say the sandy beach in the area was always slim because hotels were built so close to the water.

### **SAND PUMPED IN**

As part of the Kyo-ya plan, crews would pump in about 15,000 cubic yards of sand from two possible offshore sites to create the new beach. The groins are designed to keep much of the sand in place.

The T-groins would stick slightly out of the water, and be spaced about 270 feet apart. The technology behind the structures, designed to deflect waves and reduce rip current formation, has been employed on similar beaches on the Gulf Coast.

Kyo-ya has not yet applied for any permits for the project, which would require approvals from the state, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and several federal agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency, officials said.

The Sea Engineering report says surf spots off the Sheraton and Halekulani hotels are far enough offshore that they would not be affected by the groins. Still some remain skeptical and are voicing their opposition early.

### **SURFERS CONCERNED**

Downing, a legendary surfer, said he has seen groins fail in the past. He also said the problem at Gray's Beach was caused by the breakwater. "What we're trying to do is restore something that was destroyed when they put those

walls up," he said. "Nature made Waikiki, man destroyed Waikiki."

Other surfers also expressed concern.

Joey Carroll, a former lifeguard and longtime surfer who works at the Ty Gurney Surf School in front of the Halekulani Hotel, said the proposal needs a lot more study.

"If you're taking away surf spots, you're taking away our livelihood," Carroll said, adding the break is also widely used by residents.

"I taught my kids to surf here," he said.

Scott Werny, co-chairman of the O'ahu chapter of the Surfrider Foundation, said the group is still studying the plan. He said the group never supports the construction of "hardened structures" on the beach, but has not yet decided whether to "actively go against" the proposal.

He also said there are still plenty of questions about the plan, including whether the wave action in Hawai'i will affect the T-groins differently than waves on the Gulf Coast. And he added he would prefer to see a proposal to combat erosion along the length of Waikiki Beach, not just a small stretch of it.

"I appreciate they're willing to put forth money to improve the beach," Werny said. "But we want to support a master plan. No one is paying attention to the big picture."

Sam Lemmo, administrator for the Coastal Lands Division at the state Department of Land and Natural Resources, said the state has no immediate plans to draw up a master plan for Waikiki Beach. There are also no planned projects to combat erosion along the world-famous shoreline.

The most recent state project to tackle erosion in Waikiki was a \$475,000 sand-pumping demonstration project at Kuhio Beach, which was completed in January and brought in about 9,500 cubic yards of sand.

Within five years, the project will have to be repeated.

But securing funding for erosion-abatement projects is not easy. Before the January sand-pumping project, the last time Kuhio Beach had been replenished was in 2000, during a small pilot project in which just 1,400 cubic yards of sand was pumped in. The previous large replenishment project was in 1975.

#### **MAINTENANCE CITED**

Dolan Eversole, a coastal geologist with the University of Hawai'i Seagrant Program, said the difficult part of the erosion issue is that combating the problem requires a maintenance schedule and a plan on how to deal with the long-term causes.

The state, which is responsible for the shoreline, has neither.

"This is a huge problem," Eversole said.

Lemmo said the Sheraton is the first Waikiki hotel to propose undertaking its own beach-restoration project, but it is one of a number statewide that have said they are exploring options to combat erosion. And he pointed out resorts, community groups and even private citizens on the Neighbor Islands have already taken up small-scale pumping projects to restore their beaches.

Lemmo said several hotels inquired about the cost and permits involved in sand pumping after the most recent Kuhio Beach pilot project. Though none has gone forward with plans, he said if the Sheraton proposal succeeds, other hotels likely will follow.

Murray Towill, president of the Hawaii Hotel and Lodging Association, agreed. The group represents dozens of hotels in Waikiki, many of which see the erosion of the shoreline as a major problem that needs to be addressed.

"I think what makes sense is to explore these kinds of options," he said, adding that a partnership between shoreline property owners and the state would serve to get the work done even quicker.

Rick Egged, the executive director of the Waikiki Improvement Association, said he would like to see the overall restoration of Waikiki Beach completed with public-private partnerships that would involve the state and hotels.

Egged has been in discussions with Kyo-ya about the Sheraton plan and says beach properties are paying close attention to the proposal.

"We are very supportive of the efforts of Kyo-ya," Egged said. "It is a step in the direction of public-private partnerships, as opposed to saying, 'Hey state, this is your problem, you should take care of it.' "

### **VISITORS WEIGH IN**

On a recent morning, with the tide high, the water at the seawall fronting the Sheraton was about 3 feet deep.

No one was swimming in front of the wall, lined on the ocean floor with large rocks, but there were about 15 people adjacent to it — sitting on a small crescent of sand in front of the Halekulani Hotel that was shrinking with each wave.

Melissa Hoffelmeyer, a visitor from Salt Lake City, sat on a lounge chair in the sun, watching the waves come in. She first came to Hawai'i some 29 years ago and remembers there was still a sandy beach then — though a small one — in front of the Sheraton Waikiki.

She said she would like a little more sand, though she's not sure installing T-groins is the answer.

"I don't know if you should mess with it," she said.

Ed Walters, who was standing on the Sheraton Waikiki breakwater, said he was surprised to see how diminished parts of Waikiki Beach had become with erosion. If the T-groin plan doesn't hurt the environment, he said, it should go forward, adding, "It would be nice to see a little more beach."

#### **WAIKIKI BEACH TIMELINE**

**1910:** Major sand excavation at Queen Lili'uokalani residence fronting Royal Hawaiian and Moana beaches, causing massive erosion.

**1913-19:** Seawalls built along most of Waikiki shoreline to protect roads and new buildings quickened erosion.

**1927:** 170-foot groin built at west end of Royal Hawaiian Beach. Extended to 368 feet in 1930.

**1938-39:** 700-foot-long, shore-parallel Kuhio Beach breakwater built, known as Crib Wall.

**1951:** Kapahulu storm drain built, and thousands of cubic yards of sand added to Kuhio Beach and other spots along the shoreline.

**1952-53:** 730-foot-long parallel extension built to southeast end of Crib Wall.

**1956-57:** 360-foot-long Queens Surf groin/storm drain built.

**1959:** Nearly 19,000 cubic yards of sand dumped at Kuhio Beach.

**1965:** The Waikiki Area Erosion Project was authorized by the U.S. Congress as part of the River and Harbor Act of 1965. It was to restore 10,800 feet of Waikiki shoreline, from Duke Kahanamoku Beach to the Elks Club. The first phase of the project was at Fort DeRussy, and the second at Kuhio Beach. No other phases of the project were funded, and the cost to do the work today is estimated at \$28 million. Neither the state nor the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is pursuing the project.

**1971:** Groin installed at beach off Fort DeRussy.

**1972:** 82,000 cubic yards of sand delivered to Queens and Kuhio beaches.

**1972:** Rubble mound groins incorporated into Crib Wall, replacing sandbag groins.

**1975:** Sand replenishment project dumps 9,500 cubic yards of sand at Kuhio Beach.

**1991:** 3,000 cubic yards of sand added to Kuhio Beach.

**2000:** Pilot offshore project delivers 1,400 cubic yards of sand to Kuhio

Beach.

**2006:** State spends \$475,000 on a pilot project to pump 9,500 cubic yards of offshore sand onto Kuhio Beach, along about one-third of a mile of shoreline between the Duke Kahanamoku statue and the Kapahulu groin. Project is completed in January 2007.

*Sources: state Department of Land and Natural Resources and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*

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**PROPOSED BEACH RESTORATION PLAN**

The owners of the Sheraton Waikiki are proposing to build three T-shaped rock groins at Gray's Beach to stop erosion. Combined with sand pumping, the project would add a 38,000-square-foot sandy area to the shoreline.

**CUTAWAY SCHEMATIC OF PROPOSED BEACH PLAN**

Sheraton Waikiki | Proposed beach profile | Schematic based on engineer sketch

Existing sea wall | Rock groin under sand | Proposed beach groin

NEW BEACH

Approximate existing shoreline | Approximate mean low water

Source: Sea Engineering Inc. USGS aerial photo, The Honolulu Advertiser

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